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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life, and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates, by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Joy Luck Club* makes about the following:

Fate and Memory: While fate looks forward toward our future or destiny, memory looks back to the past. Lena's mother looks forward: "I believe my mother has the mysterious ability to see things before they happen" (p. 149). June speculates on her mother's past: "Together we look like our mother." "Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish" (p. 288). Are the daughters "fated" to face the same struggles as their mothers? Does this fate hinge on their ability to remember their mothers' pasts? Is the novel a memorial to June's mother to allow June to "become Chinese"?

Transformation: In Chinese, *nengkan* means the ability to do anything one seriously undertakes. "It was this belief in their *nengkan* that had brought my parents to America," says Rose Hsu Jordan (p. 121). Do the mothers of the Joy Luck Club transform themselves in America—or only before they arrive? In what ways are the women changed by America? In what ways are they shaped by their own daughters? Do the adult daughters come to understand "joy luck," or does it not exist?



Homework

Ask students to begin their essays, using "Essay Topics" later in this guide. Outlines are due for the next class.